Laying the Foundation for Self-Advocacy

Fourth Graders With Learning Disabilities Invite Their Peers Into the Resource Room

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"They call us the slow learning dorks."

That is what my fourth graders told me as they filed in from recess for my afternoon reading group. As a special education resource teacher in an elementary school, I taught mostly students who had specific learning disabilities (SLD). They were *not* slow learning dorks.

My students were upset and I was angry. The standard adult response combining reassurance that "they don't know what they are talking about" with the advice that "you should ignore them" seemed woefully inadequate. Even the more active approach of "tell me who they are and I will talk to them" didn't hold much promise as a solution to the problem.

As I talked more with the students, I realized that they didn't know how to respond to the children who made these kinds of comments. They didn't know what the letters SLD stood for or the meaning of the term, specific learning disability. In fact, I suspected that many of them half-believed that they actually were slow learning dorks.

According to Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2000), "Teachers often may be unaware of students' perceptions of social alienation and isolation at school or of the detrimental consequences such feelings have on students' life adjustment" (p. 30). My eyes had been opened, and I wondered what I could do to stop the other students from picking on my kids. I considered talking to those who were reported for making negative comments; however, unless I planned to follow my students into the general education classroom, to the lunchroom, and onto the playground, there didn't seem to be much that I could do to stop other children from making hurtful remarks. Students with SLD needed to know how to stick up for themselves. They needed to be educated in appropriate ways to respond to derogatory comments from peers. Borrowing from current educational terminology, they needed the skills of self-advocacy, and they needed them right away!

I talked with my students, and I talked with their classroom teachers. After much thought and discussion, we came up with "SLD, What's That?"—a three-part mini-workshop in disability awareness for general and special education students. We had decided that it was time for *all students* to leave the general education classroom and come to the SLD resource room.

Workshop Overview

The goals of the "SLD, What's That?" workshop are

- To develop self-awareness and self-advocacy skills in students with SLD.
- To increase awareness, knowledge, and understanding of SLD.
- To increase positive peer perceptions of students with SLD.

To achieve the objectives of the first goal, students with SLD actually designed and presented this three-part workshop. It was important to fully engage them in all phases of the process from planning to delivery. I did this by adjusting the level and type of participation to individual strengths. We planned together and students shared responsibilities for researching, creating visual aides, and presenting. They invited their peers in general education classrooms to be participants in the workshop.

In the first session, participants explored their perceptions of SLD, and the students presented information about what the acronym SLD meant, types of learning disabilities, and the resource program. The second session provided participants with an interactive, hands-on experience that involved a series of activities designed to simulate various types of learning problems. The final session focused on sharing and synthesizing the workshop experience and identifying learning outcomes.

Preworkshop Activities

Preparing the Students

To become effective self-advocates, students with SLD need to develop self-awareness skills and acquire knowledge about SLD. I started this process by facilitating small group discussions during scheduled resource time. We discussed the following questions:

- What is a specific learning disability?
- Why do you come to the resource room?
- How do you feel about leaving the general education classroom?
- What do other students think about special education?
- How do you respond to your classmates' questions and comments?
- What can we do to increase others' awareness of SLD?

The discussions provided opportunities to explore feelings and identify and increase student knowledge about SLD. This process naturally led to sharing

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ideas about how this disability knowledge could be conveyed to students' peers without SLD.

Collaborating With General Educators

In the planning stage, I solicited the assistance of general education teachers. Collaboration was critical to the success of the workshop. I attended grade level meetings with general educators to discuss the proposed workshop and share ideas about how to best implement it in our school. Co-planning was necessary to establish mutual goals for the workshop, schedule the sessions, review session activities, and assign co-teaching roles and responsibilities for each session.

I found that general educators were more than willing to get involved and their participation and support proved invaluable. They prepared general education students for the workshop, helped them make meaningful connections during the activities, and moderated follow-up discussions to further extend the learning experience.

Session One

Step 1: Designing Invitations and a Student Questionnaire

During their resource time, my students created special invitations to invite fourth grade general education classes to visit the SLD resource room. We invited one general education class at a time because it is difficult to manage the activities with more than 30 students in a single session. Over the course of several weeks, all the fourth grade classes in our school attended the workshop sessions.

To find out what students in general education already knew about SLD, we sent copies of a brief questionnaire along with the invitation. The questions chosen included:

1. What does the abbreviation SLD stand for?
2. Why do some students go to SLD?
3. What do students do when they go to the resource room?

The general education teacher shared the invitation with the class and passed out the questionnaire. We had decided that students would be more open in their responses if their answers remained anonymous. We emphasized that we were not looking for correct answers; instead, we wanted to find out more about their current understanding. Students were encouraged to answer each question honestly and respectfully because a summary of group results would be shared with others.

Step 2: Helping Students Develop the Presentation

To develop their self-awareness and self-advocacy skills, my students with SLD had to learn as much as possible about learning disabilities. They also had to be involved in making decisions about what information would be shared and how it would be presented. Above all, this information had to be presented by the students themselves.

When the completed questionnaires were returned to the resource room, we reviewed them together. Table 1 shows a sample of a typical student response to the three questions. We organized the information by identifying response categories or themes and tallying responses for each category. For example, when we looked at responses to our first question—What does the abbreviation SLD mean—we found that, in a class of 28 fourth-grade students, the most frequent responses for the letter "S" were "slow" (8) and "student" (7). No one knew that the "S" stood for "specific." The majority of the children (17) indicated that the letter "L" stood for "learning" and some children (6) indicated that the letter "D" stood for "disability."

I realized that SLD isn't for people that are slow in everything. They could be the very best at football (like Jeremy), but they could still have a problem with reading or something like that.

We prepared a summary of the responses to each of the three questions on chart paper to use as an advance organizer to lead into our activities for the first workshop session.

Once the questionnaire responses had been reviewed, my students were ready to develop presentations that would provide their peers with accurate information. They worked in cooperative groups to research, develop content, create visual aids, and rehearse their presentations. They also got the resource room ready for visitors, made seating arrangements, added decorations, and planned refreshments.

Step 3: Conducting Session One

Students were in charge of hosting the first workshop session. They arrived early, welcomed their peers from the general education class, directed them to their seats, and served refreshments.

The session began with the questionnaire feedback and proceeded with student-led presentations providing knowledge and information about SLD. My students explained the meaning of the term specific learning disability, why children go to the resource room, and what they do there. Individual pre-

Table 1: Sample Student Questionnaire Response

1. What does the abbreviation SLD mean?
   Answer: Slow Learning Dedication
2. Why do some students go to SLD?
   Answer: Maybe because they're not as smart as other kids. Maybe they have something that bothers them, so they go and talk to other kids.
3. What do they do there?
   Answer: Talk about their problems or they do their work that hasn't been completed.

Note: SLD = specific learning disabilities.

senters needed different levels of support. It helped them to know that a workshop was not a school play and that I was available to jump in and assist by elaborating upon points and smoothing rough spots and transitions. We ended with a question and answer session, giving the audience an opportunity to participate while student presenters served as a panel of experts.

Session Two

Step 1: Preparing Simulation Materials

Session Two was highly interactive. We decided to hold it in our school's media center because we needed room for the hands-on activities. It took time to prepare the required materials, but I have been able to use them again and again. The directions and the materials for the 10 stations are described in Table 2. The simulation activities are fairly easy to reproduce.

For each station, we prepared a card identifying the station number, directions for the activity, materials, and in some cases, an answer key. The activity directions, answer keys, and other nonconsumable materials were typed in large print, pasted on construction paper, and laminated for repeated use. "Check" was written on the back of answer keys to be easily identified when placed facedown. Teachers and students replicating this session may choose to add or subtract simulation activities. (See Station #10, "Online Simulations," for other alternatives.)

We planned enough activities so that no more than three students were at a given station at one time. It helped to have a checklist of the stations in rotation order for each participant. Premarking these checklists with a specific starting activity enabled the children dispersed among the stations and controlled movement.

Step 2: Conducting Session Two

My students again welcomed their peers when they arrived for the session, provided them with a station rotation checklist, and directed each participant to the station indicated. Before beginning the activities, I provided a brief overview of the different types of processing difficulties that would be experienced through the simulation activities. I also emphasized the wide variability of learning disabilities as well as the limitations of simulation activities. I wanted to make it clear that the simulations were designed to help participants gain a better understanding of how it might feel to have a learning disability, but that they did not accurately describe the experiences of their classmates with SLD.

One of my students then delivered the directions for the station rotation. We provided the following guidelines:

1. You will have about 5 minutes to complete the station activity.
2. Remain at a station until you are given the signal to move.
3. Return the station to its original condition.
4. Make sure CHECK sheets are returned to a facedown position.
5. Go to the next activity on your checklist.

When the rotation began, my students, who were posted among the stations, assisted with activity directions while the general education teacher and I circulated, answering questions and providing explanations of the simulations. With these guidelines and supports, the rotation went very smoothly.

Session Three

Session Three took place in the general education classroom. Each class discussed workshop experiences and identified learning outcomes. The general education teacher asked his or her students to reflect on their own experiences and learning and then share their thoughts in writing. One teacher sent the following note along with her students' written reflections:

> The workshop was great. Thanks for taking the time to share with us. It gave the students a better understanding of how frustrating the disabilities can be. Also, I think it helped Leslie and Jimmy to feel better about themselves. Here are the students' thoughts!

Written responses that were classified according to thematic categories from 28 students in one of the fourth-grade general education classes are presented in Table 3.

Supplementary Activities

- Create a Web site about learning disabilities.
- Make a list of Web sites that provide information on learning disabilities.
- Add a section with books about different kinds of disabilities to your school's media center.

Final Thoughts

Though simulations have effectively shaped attitudes (Behler, 1993; Colwell, Thompson, & Berke, 2001), the efficacy of disability simulations is controversial in the field of special education. Smart (2001) questions their use and maintains that simulations cannot allow a person without a disability to assume the identity of a person with a disability. There is also evidence that disability simulations heighten the association of disability with helplessness because positive examples of coping strategies employed by persons with disabilities are not always presented. According to Smart, major ethical issues that should be addressed when employing disability simulations include

- How to maximize the authenticity of the experience.
- The need to "confront situations in which the simulation experience leads to increased discouragement on the part of some student participants" (p. 1).
- The need to establish the relevance of disability simulations.

Many of the students who participated in SLD, What's That? indicated that they had learned how "hard" or "frustrating" it would be to have a learning disability. While I felt it was important that students in general education gain an awareness of the diffi-

Who knows someday kids with learning problems might grow up to be a famous person.

Table 2: Learning Disability Simulations

Station	Activity	Directions	Materials
#1	Mirror Writing	Some people with SLD have writing difficulties. Trace the star while looking in the mirror. Make sure that you look in the mirror and not at your hand. How well did you do?	▪ Half sheet with the outline of a large star to be traced, reproduced for each participant. ▪ Mirror propped up to view tracing. ▪ Pens or pencils.
#2	Unfinished Letters	Some people with SLD have trouble remembering what letters and words look like. You must be able to match the unfinished letters with your memory of letters and words to do this worksheet. Write down the complete word. Check your answers. Did it take a while to figure out what the words were?	▪ Worksheet with a list of words with parts of letters missing and a space to write the complete word. (It could be a list of animals or road signs.) ▪ Pens or pencils.
#3	Walking the Line	Some people with SLD have trouble making the large muscles in their bodies work together. Others may call them "clumsy." Try walking the line of tape while looking through the large or wrong end of the binoculars. Do you feel clumsy?	▪ Pair of binoculars. ▪ 10-15-inch line of masking tape on the floor.
#4	What Did You Say?	Some people with SLD have trouble following directions especially when the directions are unclear or have many steps. With your partner facing away from you, build what he or she describes. No peeking allowed. Now reverse roles and you give the directions.	▪ Drawings of 5 or 6 block structures. ▪ Set of blocks.
#5	Mixed Up Math	Some people with SLD see numbers backwards or mix up the order of digits like 15 and 51. They might have problems with columns, keeping numbers in the right place, or they mix up operation signs. Try solving the problems on this worksheet. Check your answers. How do you feel about your score?	▪ Copies of a worksheet with several math computation problems that have backwards numbers, uneven columns, unclear signs, etc. ▪ Answer key. ▪ Pencils or pens.
#6	One up on a tim	Some people with SLD have trouble with reading because they lack some important reading skills. Take turns reading to your partner. Your partner can look at the corrected copy to help you. Imagine having to read this out loud to your class.	▪ A familiar story with substitutions of words and misspellings (e.g., One up on a tim dere wat there litdle pigs. Eech pig bedided to budd a liddle hoese). ▪ Answer key (e.g., Once upon a time there were three little pigs. Each pig decided to build a little house).
#7	Backwards Letters	Some people with SLD see letters like b and d and words like saw and was backwards. Try reading this passage. Did you have to stop? Was it confusing?	▪ Laminated passage: There was a doy who bib not know who to raeb very well. Some letters looked funny. So one bay a gril helqeb him raeb the dook. Then decame good friends. ▪ Answer key: There was a boy who did not know how to read very well. Some letters looked funny. So one day a girl helped him read the book. They became good friends.
#8	As Easy as Writing Your Name	Some people with SLD take a long time to write things, and others say that their work is messy. Write your name in cursive the very best you can. On the next line, write it again, but this time, while you are writing, move your left foot on the floor in counter-clockwise circles. If you are left-handed, move your right foot in clockwise circles.	▪ Pencil. ▪ Lined paper.
#9	Hidden Words	Some people with SLD have trouble seeing where one word ends and another begins. Try reading this sentence. Write it down with the correct spacing. Check your sentence.	▪ Laminated passage: It s ver yhard toread when I hewo rds will notstand still. Some tim esit is nocstimpossi ble to knowwhereone wo rdends and the nextwor dbe gins. ▪ Answer key: It is very hard to read when the words will not stand still. Sometimes it is almost impossible to know where one word ends and the next word begins. ▪ Paper and pencils.
#10	Online Simulations	Go to the following Web sites and try the simulation activities. ▪ Pediatric Neurology.Com at http://www.pediatricneurology.com/adhd2.htm for dyslexia and dysgraphia simulations ▪ National Coalition of Auditory Processing Disorders at http://www.ncapd.org for auditory processing disorders ▪ Mrs. Karen Lakes Home Page at http://www.nasp.k12.in.us/staff/lakes/lakes.html for LD simulations	

What Does the Literature Say About Self-Advocacy and Peer Perceptions?

During the 1998-99 school year, approximately 38% of students with learning disabilities (1,081,798 children ages 6-21) were served in different educational environments (special education resource settings) for 21%-60% of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). While peers in general education may be accustomed to the daily comings and goings of students receiving special education services, information to increase disability awareness and understanding is rarely provided (Fulk & Smith, 1995; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Frequently student perceptions of peers with disabilities are negative and reflect a lack of social acceptance (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Royal & Roberts, 1987). Seventeen peer rating sociometric studies conducted over a 20-year period, revealed that children with SLD had consistently lower peer status in comparison to children without disabilities (Ochoa & Olivarez). An examination of the perceptions of 98 students in Grades 1-6 regarding instructional and management adaptations for students with learning and behavior problems revealed that almost one third (31%) of the students sampled responded negatively to the easier or different work given to some classmates (Fulk & Smith). Interviews with 20 fourth- and fifth- grade students with SLD focusing on school-related loneliness revealed that more than half of the students reported feeling lonely at school and that those students who reported higher loneliness more frequently gave examples indicating that loneliness resulted from isolation and exclusion from the group (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000).

The Need for Preventative Strategies. Studies documenting negative peer perceptions raise questions about the availability of social support for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. As defined by Farmer and Farmer (1996), social support involves "processes of social exchange that contribute to the development of individuals' behavioral patterns, social cognition, and values" (p. 433). Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2001) emphasize the emotional component of social support, defining it as "the process by which the individual feels valued, cared for, and connected to a group of people" (p. 391).

Sixty special and general educators working with students with SLD were interviewed to find out how they provided social support to students. Findings indicated that general educators focused more on their role as facilitators of social relationships, while special educators tended to develop social interventions only in response to problems and to solve problems for students rather than to facilitate students' problem-solving skills. Few teachers from either group discussed the use of preventative strategies to promote respect, acceptance, and belonging in the classroom (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001).

Effective Practice. Royal and Roberts (1987) found a possible link between familiarity and acceptance of disabilities. Their investigation of third through twelfth grade students' perceptions and attitudes toward 20 different disabilities revealed that younger children were least familiar and also least accepting of disabilities. Conversely, older students who indicated that they were more familiar with disabilities were also found to be more accepting. These findings suggest the need to focus educational efforts on the identification and implementation of procedures that may increase younger children's familiarity with disabilities with an emphasis on understanding and acceptance.

The recent focus on self-determination in the disability community has led educators to recognize the role that students with disabilities can play in this process (Field, 1996). Pocock et al., (2002) described efforts in one school district to promote self-determination in high school students with SLD by specifically focusing on the skills of self-awareness and self-advocacy. Their program, Learning and Education About Disabilities (LEAD), was chosen as an exemplar site for the Self-Determination Synthesis Project, funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education.

Students who participated in LEAD (Pocock et al., 2002) not only developed their own skills but also "raised the community's consciousness about individuals with LD and helped younger students understand their own disabilities" (p. 215). Five factors identified as critical to the success of the LEAD program included

- Introducing self-determination component skills in an effective sequence beginning with students with SLD first understanding their own strengths, challenges, learning styles, and interests (self-awareness) and then moving on to sharing that information with others (self-advocacy).
- Maintaining a philosophy of student ownership with an appropriate balance of support, guidance, and independence.
- Effective modeling of self-advocacy skills.
- Opportunities for importing self-advocacy skills embedded in activities outside the classroom.
- Creating a school culture that supports self-advocacy.

According to Field (1996), "There is a need to examine factors in early childhood that promote or inhibit self-determination, and develop interventions and supports accordingly" (p.16). The SLD, What's That? workshop experience was designed for implementation at the elementary school level. It is unique in that most educational efforts to develop the self-awareness and self-advocacy skills critical to self-determination have targeted young adults (Field; Roffman & Herzog, 1994; Yuan, 1994). SLD, What's That? provides evidence that the same research-supported practices and factors that were previously identified as critical to the success of an exemplary program for high school students (Pocock et al., 2002) can be incorporated into programs at the elementary school level, laying a foundation for self-advocacy that can be built on as students with disabilities progress through their schooling.

Table 3: Classification System Developed from Student Comments

Category	Definition	# Comments
Appreciation/ Enjoyment	"Thank you for the workshop," or "I had fun."	16
Increased Knowledge About SLD	"I learned what SLD is all about."	20
Empathy/Understanding	"It helped me realize what it would feel like."	13
Support	"I don't think you should make fun of students with SLD."	7
Strengths of Students With SLD	"Children with SLD learn how to do better in subjects."	8

Note: SLD = Specific Learning Disabilities

culties faced by students with SLD, I also felt that it was equally—if not more important—that they recognized that SLD can be compensated for with coping strategies and specialized instruction. The intent of these activities was not to elicit pity, but rather understanding and respect.

According to Behler (1993), negative feelings can be counteracted relatively easily if the teacher is prepared with positive examples of successful coping strategies on the part of individuals with disabilities. This is seen in the positive comments from participants focusing on how students with SLD could, as one general education student wrote, "break that learning disability."

I hope that teachers who choose to recreate these or similar activities, will find, as I did, that the general education students who participate gain a better understanding of SLD. At the very least, I hope that the students will learn that SLD stands for specific learning disability and not slow learning dorks. More importantly, I hope that teachers will see that their students with SLD have acquired disability knowledge and the language to explain it to others. One boy who attended the SLD, What's That? workshop summed up its purpose in one sentence. He wrote, "Now I know the real meaning of SLD and I can tell other people."

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